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More eyes on COVID-19: Perspectives from Education Studies

Schools as organisations and the science of re-opening

One of the most public of controversies has been about when and how to re-open schools after the pandemic lockdown. The fierce debate on the subject is understandable. In mid-May 2020, about 1725 million learners in more than 156 countries worldwide were affected by school closures. Everywhere in the world, parents send their children to school to learn on the assumption that their loved ones will be safe and secure. COVID-19 has, at the very least, caused us to question that assumption.

How therefore can education as a field of study help answer questions about the re-opening of schools? One of the most powerful insights available comes from studies of schools as organisations.

Schools are complex places. They have been described as ecologies, in that many different kinds of human actors exist in this place called school. They interact with each other and often depend on each other. These humans occupying the organisation govern and manage, teach and learn, serve and administer, lead and follow. What this means is that to simply focus on children is to miss the presence and interactions among teachers, secretaries, kitchen staff, cleaners, caretaking staff, delivery personnel, principals, deputies and parents who pass through the organisation throughout the day.

This observation has serious consequences in a pandemic. It means that an invisible virus can enter, live and thrive in this ecosystem, whether or not children are vectors of the disease.

Schools are compact places. There is a solid wall and fence (most times) cordoning off the school from the outside world, a secure and guarded entrance, locked doors into the schools, and occupied classrooms. In most South African schools, those classrooms are packed with learners, even more so when departmental budgets were sliced. Schools determine class sizes depending on the number of teachers they can pay. This observation has direct consequences for how to think about social distancing, especially at that point when all children are back at school.

Schools are contrived places. Children do not roam around freely. They are confined within and move between classrooms. There are breaks that bring students out of classrooms into larger congregations and call them back into confined spaces. The curriculum distributes teachers to some classes as specialists and to others as supervisors when a teacher is absent. Between classes, teachers live in staffrooms that become more or less occupied depending on the time of day or the calling of special events such as staff meetings. In classrooms, students share pencils; in the school library, books; and on the playground, balls and bats.

This observation means that schools are highly mobile places in which streams of human beings move past each other, touch each other, hug and tackle each other.

Schools are sometimes chaotic places. A landmark study describes many South African schools as '(dis)organisations'. Timetables are unpredictable. Teacher absenteeism is high. Basic resources are in short supply. Students come late and leave early. At any point in the school day there are children outside and strangers hanging around the plant. The fact that school principals and teachers are on the school grounds does not mean that active teaching is being done.

This observation implies that the organisational discipline required for managing people, executing plans and organising resources for mitigation purposes would be severely compromised in such dysfunctional contexts.

Why do these aspects of schools as organisations even matter in a pandemic? Because simply talking about opening schools without accounting for how more or less than 1000 humans live and learn in this bounded organisation would have serious implications for the spread of a virus at close quarters. There are no regulations that can fully or consistently manage these many living, moving and interacting elements of an organisation for 6 h a day and for 5 days a week over the months that the pandemic rages in the broader society.

The organisation of a school has a direct bearing on the social and educational lives of those inside of them. School climate studies, for example, have shown that a healthy, positive school environment invariably leads to feelings of well-being and improved academic attainment. Now place children coming out of an extended lockdown in these complex, compact and contrived environments during a pandemic and immediately there could be expected to be fears, anxieties and other kinds of distresses that are likely to affect living and learning inside these organisations.

One policy option is to invest in the re-organisation of schools to receive children during a pandemic – as in the case of a phased return of children by grade. Another is to close the schools until such time that safe, secure and well-managed organisations can be put in place given the high risk of infection under the conditions described.

What the complexity of schools as organisations demonstrate is that re-opening decisions based on epidemiological judgements alone can place thousands of lives at risk.